

Joint Meeting of the Board of Education & the WWMS/Keigwin Building Committee

Woodrow Wilson Middle School Library/Media Center

Meeting Minutes

October 6, 2016, 6:00 PM

In attendance from Building Committee: Mary Bartolotta, Chair, Chris Drake, Vice Chair, Chris Bonsignore, Kristy Byrd, Sheila Daniels, John Giuliano, Gene Nocera, Rich Pelletier, Philip Pessina, and Ted Raczka

In attendance from Board of Education: Vincent Loffredo, Chair, Sheila Daniels, Vice Chair, Franca Biales, Secretary and Cheryl McClellan

Others: Patricia Charles, Superintendent, Enza Macri, Associate Superintendent, Cheryl Gonzalez, WWMS Principal, Patrick Gallagher, Milone & MacBroom

Absent: John Cross and John Phillips from the Building Committee and Anita Dempsey White, Deborah Cain, Marilyn Dunkley and Linda Szynekowicz for the Board of Education.

The meeting was called to order at 6:08 PM.

The agenda was reviewed.

Discussion on Configuration of WWMS

Dr. Charles reminded the committee that the group previously discussed configuration of the future middle school at the last Building Committee meeting. She stated her vision was a grades 6 - 8 middle school, however, the committee asked her to find out if grade 6 could be incorporated into the existing elementary schools.

Dr. Charles invited Patrick Gallagher from Milone & MacBroom to attend the meeting to share the enrollment projections and help the committee understand the research they have done over the last year and a half analyzing our elementary schools for redistricting and closure. Additionally, Dr. Charles stated Mr. Gallagher could also assist with questions regarding the building construction process.

Mr. Gallagher shared information Milone & MacBroom looked at including housing information, birth records, school capacity, etc. He stated that any expectation to add grade 6 students would require elementary redistricting. Dr. Macri clarified that the current configuration would not allow students to return to their home school. Macdonough, Snow, and Farm Hill do not have room as they are currently configured.

Dr. Nocera stated that it is possible to integrate the special areas into the regular classrooms in order to fit two more classes at Macdonough, "It's not perfect, but it still works."

Dr. Macri reminded the group that the school already shares a classroom for music and art.

The question was posed by many individuals as to why we are having a joint meeting; Chair Mary Bartolotta responded that it is to have an open discussion to weigh all the options so members can feel comfortable with the decision the committee makes. After weighing the options, the group will have a solid foundation to move forward. She expressed concern that parents may feel worried. She stated, "We need to look at 6, 7, 8, as well as the whole school district, and the use of magnet schools. Parents want stable futures for their children." Her goal is for committee members and parents to feel comfortable with whatever option the committee moves forward.

Mr. Gallagher encouraged the district to update enrollment projections regularly when making these decisions.

The question was posed about using Keigwin as one of the elementary schools. Mr. Gallagher stated there are building code concerns – no Kindergarten students are allowed on the second floor. He felt there is little flexibility to convert Keigwin to an elementary school. Size and location of bathroom facilities are also a factor. He did not feel the need for space would justify converting Keigwin to an elementary school. The district would need to redraw the attendance zones and look at the dynamics of redistricting. Just because the students can fit, does not mean the demographics would work well. Keigwin is too close to Lawrence School. Milone & MacBroom's work needs to be combined with a detailed facilities study to provide the information the committee needs to move forward.

Mr. Raczka asked how is the competition configured. He asked about Glastonbury's configuration and if other school districts are doing similar closing of schools. Dr. Macri stated that Eastbury School (in Glastonbury) is considering closing in 2018. The discussion of grade configuration continued.

Dr. Nocera commented that big middle schools are being looked at critically. K-8 is frequently the option chosen. Ms. Bartolotta addressed the research on the emotional wellbeing of grade 6 students when placed with grade 7 and 8 students. Dr. Nocera cited K-8 schools in New Haven, Bristol, and Waterbury. Ms. Daniels stated that we do not have the ability to make our schools K - 8.

Mr. Drake addressed the meeting with State DAS last week. Michelle Dixon noted the ages of the school. The message conveyed was that a long-term capital improvement project with consolidation is warranted to reduce the total number of schools. More financial aid is offered to districts that do so.

A new school construction project makes closing a school much more palatable.

A discussion between the Board members and Building Committee members covered many subjects, including:

Where will students go during construction? Stay here while the new school is being built? If the district is considering this, look at the whole district for the future. Could we maintain Keigwin during construction?

DAS was pleased that Middletown has a Triple A bond rating. Chair Bartolotta stated DAS thought the City's bonding for ten years was ambitious and maybe the City should ask the question of a 15 year bond to construct a new school. She stated that the City needs to consider carefully what we are spending money on in the future for bonding. We need to pace ourselves. "We don't want to spend additional money later because we didn't fully think out the plan."

Mr. Drake discussed operational economies of scale, "If every child were to return to home schools we would need more teachers."

Dr. Nocera asked for info about the number of teachers needed at the elementary schools if grade 6 was returned. Can specials be accommodated?

Dr. Macri reported that Keigwin has 26 full-time teachers. Additionally, she shared that Thomas Edison Middle Magnet School (TEMS) scores are 20% lower than Middletown's scores. 733 students are enrolled at Thomas Edison Magnet. Ms. Biales felt that we lose our top students to TEMS. She also felt we lose top students to magnet schools in other communities, citing our scores as part of the issue. Dr. Macri stated that it is not just confined to top students due to the lottery process.

It was noted that K - 5 schools will stabilize in the next two years and the reduction will then be felt at the middle and high school.

Ms. Daniels asked, "Why wouldn't we close Keigwin and move the students back to our elementary schools?" She noted that the test scores go down at the middle school. She suggested that we look at a different configuration at WWMS.

Dr. Macri expressed concern about not doing a teaming model at the middle school level. Teachers need the team time to meet to support the social and emotional development of students.

Ms. Daniels understood concerns about social and emotional development, but expressed concern about the academic component, asking, "Why is this model held onto so desperately?" She felt we could avoid upsetting 8 elementary schools by adding the students to the current WWMS building.

Mr. Drake said that would make it even more difficult for swing space if there are 1,000 students in the building. Additionally, we would put more kids in the building in the worst shape.

Chair Bartolotta stated the make-up of the landscape doesn't lend to adding on to WWMS.

Mr. Drake stated it is politically easier to shut down a middle school than an elementary school.

Ms. Daniels asked if our city is likely to support a new building. She voiced concern that people will not want to raise our taxes.

Mr. Loffredo stated that the high school is paid off in the next year. If the city is advising doing nothing, he feared students would move to other towns' schools. He stated that middle school years are a critical investment. He urged investing for the long-term, i.e. a long term Grade 6 - 8 middle school. It will also be complimented by the new park and recreational fields. He said that based on the presentation at DAS, we need to move on this by June, 2017. The rules for building schools will change substantially in the near future. They strongly urged us to a referendum before then.

Mr. Giuliano brought up swing space and asked if we could use Vinal Technical School? That was brought up at the DAS meeting. He also discussed the condition of the current WWMS. He said the entire building is a distraction to learning – power, electrical, flooding, wear and tear, are all issues. He said the building has been cobbled together. He said the custodians run around with buckets because of roof leaks.

Chair Bartolotta stated that we need to make sure we are investing in our schools to keep our families in Middletown. A discussion ensued regarding City spending of funds in various areas. She urged the group about going out to bid and taking the time to do it right once.

Mr. Pessina liked the idea of using Vinal as we focus on renovating this school. Would Vinal be able to accept our students over there? Chair Bartolotta said there was no concrete discussion on the use of Vinal.

Mr. Pelletier expressed concern that the WWMS building does not accommodate people with disabilities. The building is spread out and it takes a long time to get to classes. Dr. Nocera commented that the building was renovated four times (last in 1993).

There are many questions that were discussed and need answers before considering building a new school; some of the decisions have to be made by the Board of Education which includes redistricting, closing an elementary school, closing a school and redistricting, or using Keigwin as an elementary

school. The next decision that needs to be made is should Middletown redistrict to K – 6 or have a comprehensive Grade 6 – 8 middle school.

Other operational questions include:

- Can we hold off closing a school – operationally the Board needs to close a school to meet the budget.
- What swing space will be used during construction; should this be Keigwin?
- Should we leave the closing of a school until a new school is built?
- Can we hold off closing a school?

Further discussion was held on the following topics; it was noted that the Building Committee, once the decision is made regarding redistricting to K-6 or a middle school of grades 6 –8 will have to be decisive on their decision.

- How long does it take to do a feasibility study?
- DAS wants to know the full plan for the district.
- We need to have an architectural study.

Chair Bartolotta said we must move forward with an architect to create a feasibility study. Chair Loffredo states it takes 6 months to get the application into the state and 6 months to get it through the city to a vote. DAS insists the building must be completed in 2 years.

The question was asked if the bid process can be done for the October meeting of the City Council? The importance of moving quickly was reiterated. DAS rules will become more difficult. We will lose financially by waiting.

The meeting members stated that the study was needed to address the following questions:

- Renovate or reconfigure WWMS to Grades 6 - 8
- Keigwin as a Grade 6 - 8 site?
- Keigwin as swing space or an alternative elementary school?
- Look at swing space
- Look at the elementary and middle school as we plan for the future long range.

MOTION: Mr. Pelletier moved to request that the Common Council hire an architect to do a Feasibility Study and was seconded by Mr. Pessina. The members of the Board of Education and WWMS/Keigwin Building Committee voted unanimously to move their request forward. The following people were not present for the vote: John Phillips from the Building Committee and Anita Dempsey White, Deborah Cain, Marilyn Dunkley and Linda Szykowitz for the Board of Education.

There was a consensus that the Grade 6 - 8 model is preferred by the majority of committee members. They need to consider what is the best practice WWMS model to use. An architect needs to understand the educational part of it.

Dr. Nocera is not in favor of closing an elementary school. He is in favor of 6 – 8, but not of closing an elementary school.

MOTION: Move to adjourn at 7:45 PM passed with a motion by Ms. Daniels and a second by Dr. Nocera with a unanimous vote by the joint members attending. The Chair adjourned the meeting at 7:45 p.m.